The Top Ten Assumptions That Can (And Do!) Kill A Sales Career!

By: Gerry Layo

Be careful what you assume. Pre-conceived notions ring the death bell more than anything for a sales career. In today's marketplace where there is more access to information, more knowledge about pricing and competition, and quite frankly, more choices for your prospects, customers, and clients, salespeople need to make all the right moves…ALL THE TIME! Here at Sales Coach International, we are carrying around the banner that says "Assume Nothing." In order to illustrate the importance of this, here are the top ten assumptions that salespeople can make that can often kill their career:

1. Features Sell- Salespeople of today go out into the marketplace and spew the many features of the products and services that they offer. We call this "Showing up and Throwing Up!" The people that buy your products/services do not do so because of the features that your product and/or service offers but rather the benefits that those features can bring to them. Here is a solid drill for you. Write this down:

"NOBODY WANTS TO BUY WHAT I'M SELLING!!"

Now that we have established that the customer doesn't want to buy the bells and whistles that your product/service offers, stop assuming that they will draw the line between what your product/service offers and what it is that they need. So how do we do this? It's easy: At the end of every feature statement you need to bridge to the next statement with ***"….so what that means to you is this!"***

What comes out of your mouth next is the benefit statement that truly is the motivation for your customer or prospect to buy! Don't assume that your prospects, customers, or clients will know how to tie the two together without your help!

2. Everyone Loves Small Talk- There have been many books written on the value of building rapport with a prospect, customer, or client in order to gain their trust. While I agree with this, I find that too many salespeople feel that every sales interaction needs to start with the obligatory round of small talk about the weather, sports, recent news, or some other plastic nonsense. Why is this? It is my belief that salespeople do this for their own comfort only.

There is undoubtedly a need for some training in this area. Small talk is just that: Small Talk! This type of banter is typically teed up so that the salesperson can gain some insight as to the mood, needs, style, and interests of the prospect, customer, or client. However, it has its place. Realize when getting down to business is necessary. Realize when the person on the other end is faking it along with you and then have the presence of mind to move to the business at hand.

Once you have established some sort of relationship with a prospect, customer, or client (whether that is after a few minutes or a few months) the conversations should revolve around the things that they want to address, not the other way around! Remember, the best way to get them to trust you is to get them talking about themselves, their issues, their challenges, their *stuff!* If you still feel the need to have some initial banter before getting down to business, make sure it is about something that is important to them.

Don't know what that is? Here's a suggestion: Go out right now and buy "Swim With The Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive" by Harvey Mackay. In this book you will find The Mackay 66. These are 66 individual points that sales reps of Mackay Envelope were to find out about their prospects, customers, and/or clients. With even 50% of this information, you could not help but have A) a strong relationship with this person and B) many topics with which to focus your attention and conversation during the sales process.

Most importantly, do not assume that you need to *"tenderize the meat before you throw it into the skillet!"* Salespeople work very hard to get the attention of their prospects, customers, and clients regularly. Once you have earned it, don't spend too much of your time (and theirs) on non-relevant issues.

3. Your Time Frame is the Same as Your Customer's- I have seen countless salespeople spend many hours doing all of the things necessary to get a meeting with a prospect or customer. Once the meeting is set, they prepare a great value proposition and present their case very well. In the best of these circumstances, they indeed find a prospect or customer interested in potentially pursuing some future possibility of doing business with them. (How was that for a bland, non-committal statement)? The meeting ends with everyone somewhat enthusiastic about the potential of doing something together. Now…fast-forward a couple of weeks. Your calls are not being returned. Your e-mails aren't either. You are ready to move forward but the prospect has dropped off the face of the earth. You have already counted this one as a top-level opportunity and told everyone it was in the bag. What the heck happened?

One of the biggest assumptions that I see salespeople making in the field today is that the customer has the same interest in buying from you that you have in selling to him/her. It needs to be understood that ***a customer does things for their reasons, not yours!*** However, if those reasons (their motivators) are not discussed during the initial meeting, the salesperson has little to re-address the customer with when reviving interest later in the sales cycle. In other words, we cannot assume that the customer will make all the right moves to buy from us at the speed and rate, which we choose. Therefore, we need to ask appropriate questions to gauge *and perhaps even set* the customer's urgency.

4. All of Your Accounts Love You! -This is one of the most dangerous assumptions that can be made in today's marketplace. Yet there are salespeople out there that are taking their customer's loyalty for granted even as you read this! Think about what it is that you do for a living. As a sales professional, part of your business life is dedicated to continually calling on and trying to capture part of the market share of your competitors. You are continually introducing yourself and your company to the customers that are currently doing business with your competitors. As a result, you are looking for a few of them to turn a *cheating eye* toward you and your company to "give you a shot" at earning their business. *Here is a news flash for you:* ***Your competition is doing the same thing with your customers as you read this! And they just might be better at it than YOU!!***

Therefore, we, as salespeople can never take our customer's business for granted. We need to be continually looking for ways to add value, over-deliver, and strengthen our relationships. Here is a great drill: Imagine that this scenario will follow every interaction that you have with your existing customers or clients: One hour after you leave their office, they will be in a room with 100 of your top prospects. What do you want them to be saying?

5. Your Customer Will Refer You To Others- Referrals to new prospective business from happy customers are one of the hallmarks of sales success that we all strive for as sales professionals. However, too many salespeople assume that their customers will automatically think of them, and then subsequently refer them when the opportunity presents itself. WRONG!! How many times have we wished for more referrals from our customers? How many times have we hoped that the customer will think of us when they are networking with their colleagues? Here are my Big 5 Rules for getting constant streams of referrals: 1. You must ASK for them---A lot; 2. You must EARN the right to ask for them by over-delivering! 3. You must make it easy to refer! 4. You must professionally follow up on *every referral!* 5. Say Thank You!! (In different ways each time!)

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If you make all of the right moves, a customer should turn into a raving fan for you and your company. However, the word *should* in itself states there is an assumption. So, leave nothing to chance and earn the right to ask and make it easy to refer, follow up on every one, and thank your customer from the bottom of your heart. The best of the best in the field of sales realize that every great customer is worth several more great customers. But, like everything else, it rarely happens on autopilot!

6. <u>Customers are Impressed With Your Knowledge</u>- Zig Ziglar said it best when he said, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care!" One of the biggest faults of salespeople today is confusing the need to *tell* with the desire to *sell*. Although there is a time to develop your prospect, customer, and client's trust in you based upon your knowledge, that time is later in the process once other issues have been addressed.

As a buyer yourself, how impressed are you with all of the techno-babble that some salespeople feel they must subject you to? Does this information draw you in or push you away? Are you impressed with the salesperson that tells you what he/she knows or one that works (through Smart Selling questions) to find out what it is that you need? Don't assume that the buyer needs all the information that you possess. Instead, find out what they need, and then meet those needs.

7. <u>My Product/Service Meets All of My Prospect's Needs</u>- We'd all love to think so, but that isn't so! Our product or service may not meet the needs or desires of the prospects, customers or clients that we are addressing today. Sometimes the answer is "no"! Sometimes they don't qualify! Sometimes, *we* don't qualify! Sometimes, there is no match!
Try this as a drill: Start every initial meeting to introduce a new idea, product, or service with a variation of this statement:

"It is very important to us that we have a solid match with the companies or people that we do business with. Therefore, after reviewing your company's needs, if it appears that we don't have a fit, on your part or ours, I will get out of your hair…time is money! However, if, after an appropriate mutual assessment, it appears that we do have a match…AND, DUE TO INITIAL RESEARCH, I THINK WE MIGHT, then I will show you how we can ___________________," then I might ask you to explore with me how we may do business together today. Is that fair?"

If, after this initial discovery period, you discover that your prospects needs cannot be met or are not consistent with what your company can and will provide, then your duty, as a professional is to walk away. If it appears, however, that you do have a potential fit, it is incumbent upon you as a sales professional to design a value proposition that will meet their highest value needs and lead them to the decision to do business with you. (Yes, this is the time to close!)

8. <u>The Customer Never Changes</u>- In the past couple of years, many salespeople have been facing the *changing of the guard* inside their client companies. The person with whom they had the strong relationship suddenly has been let go, replaced, or has left the company. In some instances, management makes the change in such positions because of the relationships that exist, thus making sure that all vendors are getting a shot.

I have seen many salespeople lose some of their bigger accounts because of these things. What do we learn from this? E—X—P—A—N—D your circle of influence within you accounts. Get to know more than one contact or purchaser within the account. Take an entire department out to lunch. Ask to meet others within the company. Earn your way into the doors of others. Become a valued resource to many levels of the company. Earn your way into the top offices and meet the decision makers. Send thank you notes to everyone. Make sure the buzz in that company regarding your service or product is about YOU!! Never assume that your customer will never change…just be better prepared for when it happens!

9. The Customer is Interested in My Issues- I read an interesting analogy recently in a book entitled "How to Become a Rainmaker" by Jeffery Fox. The analogy was about a babysitter. He stated there are two basic rules that a babysitter should follow. The first rule states that no matter how much trouble the kids gave you while the parents were away, keep it to yourself. When the parents come home after a much needed night away from the children and ask, "How were they?" the answer is always "Great-No problems!" Rule number two states that the babysitter should leave the house a little cleaner than they found it. Making sure that these two rules are followed should assure that the babysitter will have a repeat engagement with that family. Why? Because she sells a relaxed evening and a clean house (Benefits!) How does this relate to sales? Once a customer hires you to do a job (create a solution), they don't want to hear your problems about getting it done. They don't care! Do a great job, do it on time, do it on budget, don't complain, and give the customer a little extra. This is the blueprint for customer satisfaction.
Your prospects, customers and clients don't want to buy what you are selling! (Remember that from above?) In fact, they don't care much about you at all. They don't care about your sales contests, your problems with traffic, your personal issues, or why your shipments are late. They only care about themselves and their problems. You are in front of them only because they believe that you might be able to help better their situation. You are there by invitation only. It is your duty to focus only on the customer. You must be on "*high receive!"* You are there to ask questions about them, their issues, their pains, their fears, their desires, and their highest value needs. And you are there to *listen!!* Be very conscious of making sure that most of your sentences have a "you" in them rather than an "I." Never assume that they want to hear about you and your issues!

10. Your Research Will Give You All The Ammo You Need- In today's information filled world, it is much easier for the sales professional to gain access to vital data before meeting the prospect or customer. The best salespeople do a thorough amount of research to get well armed to fight the battle with the customer. However, what you do (or don't do) with that information is imperative to the sales call.
The fact that you have access to a lot of information does not negate your need, as a sales professional, to do a very thorough needs analysis with your prospect or customer on the sales call. In fact, our experience has shown us that often times, the information discovered during the initial research is incorrect or outdated. But besides that, lets remember one of the main reasons that we ask questions throughout the sales process is to show the prospect, customer, or client that we are focused on them and their needs. The questions will show them that we care.
We have all heard the old adage regarding "keeping a few cards up your sleeve." This is very appropriate in regards to pre-meeting info. Knowledge truly is power if it is used appropriately. Remember, the best source for the things that we truly need to know is the person or persons with whom you will be striking the deal. Never assume that you don't need to ask!

These are the top ten assumptions that you MUST be careful to guard against for a successful sales career. Make sure that you go into every sales encounter prepared to make all of the right moves and do not get bogged down with assumptions such as these. Many of us need to go back to our roots as junior salespeople and "Be just *Dumb Enough* (or is that Smart Enough) to assume nothing."

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